

**THE SUPREME COURT OF GEORGIA
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE COURTS
COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN**

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2008

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The Supreme Court of Georgia Committee on Justice for Children (J4C) (formerly known as the Child Placement Project) was created in 1995 to assess and improve court proceedings involving abused and neglected children in our courts. The J4C is a part of the Federal Court Improvement Program, originally authorized as part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) of 1993. All 50 states currently participate in this program which provides funds to the highest court in the state to improve court process as it relates to the safety, well-being and permanence of children in foster care.

With direction from the J4C Committee, from our federal grant guidelines and in conversation with community partners, J4C has identified five primary areas of focus. They are: 1) Improving legal representation; 2) Establishing data measures for juvenile courts; 3) Improving appeals of termination of parental rights; 4) Increasing placement stability and 5) Preventing unnecessary removals.

The mission of the Committee on Justice for Children (J4C) is to improve the legal and court process of court-involved children in civil child abuse and neglect proceedings.

IMPROVING LEGAL REPRESENTATION

A long-standing priority of J4C has been improving both the quantity and quality of legal representation for all parties in deprivation matters. In order to do so, we have taken a three-fold approach; first establish standards of practice, second ensure attorney access to high-quality training that aligns with the standards of practice and finally develop a method of providing quality assurance.

• Standards of Practice.

With financial support and technical assistance from J4C, in 2007 the Georgia Public Defender Standards Council (GPDSC) drafted standard of practice for attorneys representing parents. In 2008, the J4C and GPDSC supported Georgia Parent Attorney Advocacy Council has worked to spread knowledge of the standards and to encourage compliance by parent attorneys throughout the state. Similarly with regards to child representation, the Georgia Association of Council for Children (GACC), as well as a diverse stakeholder group led by J4C Committee member the Honorable Judge

Kevin Guidry, Juvenile Court of the Piedmont Judicial Circuit have continued to debate the appropriate role of counsel for children in deprivation matters and to revise and refine the child representation standards drafted in 2007. As to Agency representation, DFCS, as a part of the CFSR PIP has been working to establish standards for SAAGs and J4C has provide input and support when requested.

- **Training.** J4C hosts biannual child welfare attorney trainings at the State Bar and partners with other agencies to host trainings such as GPDSC's parent attorney trainings and Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation's Lecture Series on Critical Issues Facing Special Needs and At-Risk Children. In March of 2008, J4C hosted its first trial skills training and brought in experts from the National Institute for Trial Advocacy (NITA) to work with nearly 70 Georgia attorneys on child welfare specific trial skills. Also of note in 2008, J4C worked in collaboration with the GACC to bring the National Association of Council for Children's annual conference to Savannah where more than 650 child welfare attorneys (including 200 from Georgia) received some of the best training available in the nation.
- **Quality Assurance.** Two contractors, along with J4C staff have been active in reviewing practice in multiple counties with regards to issues of particular importance to Georgia including timeliness of adoptions and children aging out of foster care.

ESTABLISHING DATA MEASURES FOR JUVENILE COURT

The J4C has fully embraced the importance of outcome measurement to ensure the health and well-being of our children, as well as to ensure our courts are operating in an effective manner. For several years now, J4C has partnered with Fostering Court Improvement (FCI) to access more than 100 data measures relevant to child welfare. In partnership with the DFCS and the OCA, these measures, broken down by county, DFCS region, judicial circuit and judicial district are made publicly available on the web at www.fosteringcourtimprovement.org/ga.

Statistics for Fulton County, Georgia

Statistics for Fulton County

Charts:

- [CPS Reports](#)
- [Removals](#)
- [Foster Care Population](#)
- [Discharges](#)
- [Child and Family Services Review](#)



Statistics for Larger Regions: [Region 13](#), [Atlanta Circuit](#), [Fifth District](#).

Tables:

Fulton County Children Subject of Maltreatment Investigations (duplicated) During January 2007 through December 2007	Count	Rate	State Rate	Rank (high=1 to lower=159)
Children Subject of Maltreatment Investigations	4,492	15.4 per 10K	22.9 per 10K	140.5
Victim Reports	1,985	6.8 per 10K	10.7 per 10K	142.5
Victim Reports of Neglect	1,565	5.4 per 10K	9.1 per 10K	142.5
Victim Reports of Physical Abuse	272	0.9 per 10K	1.0 per 10K	100
Victim Reports of Sexual Abuse	73	0.2 per 10K	0.4 per 10K	126
Victim Reports of Other Abuse	75	0.3 per 10K	0.2 per 10K	45
Repeat Victims within 3 Months, October 2006 to September 2007	44/2,033	2.2%	1.7%	47
Repeat Victims within 6 Months, July 2006 to June 2007	74/1,917	3.9%	3.2%	49.5
Repeat Victims within 12 Months, January 2006 to December 2006	165/2,372	7%	6.8%	70.5
Victims Removed to Foster Care	542/1,985	27.3%	19.5%	17.5
Victims Not Removed to Foster Care	1,443/1,985	72.7%	80.5%	142.5
Non-Victims Removed to Foster Care	180/2,507	7.2%	5.3%	21
Removed to Foster Care Before Report	19/722	2.6%	3%	41.5
Removed to Foster Care within 3 Days of Report	270/722	37.4%	40.1%	66
Removed to Foster Care within 7 Days of Report	330/722	45.7%	45.8%	62
Median Days from Report to Removal	722	14.0 days	14.0 days	104.5
Removed to Foster Care Prior to Start of Investigation	NA/722	na	na	88
Removed Victims Revictimized within 3 Months, October 2006 to September 2007	13/553	2.4%	1%	21
Removed Victims Revictimized within 6 Months, July 2006 to June 2007	15/525	2.9%	1.9%	35
Removed Victims Revictimized within 12 Months, January 2006 to December 2006	32/633	5.1%	4.2%	47

<http://www.fosteringcourtimprovement.org/ga/County/Fulton/> (1 of 5) [4/30/2009 12:13:27 PM]

J4C recognizes that the website alone is insufficient to promote actual use of the data so several strategies have been put into practice to incorporate the data into the daily practices of Georgia's juvenile courts. J4C first began working with Georgia juvenile court judges to convene summits in 2007. This past

Justice 4 Children Summits are day-long, collaborative events that include substantive trainings, review court & agency outcome data and performance trends and facilitate the development of local multidisciplinary action plans.

year a total of 12 Justice for Children Summits were held, reaching 25 counties. When a county or circuit hosts a summit, a large

portion of the day is devoted first to an explanation of the most relevant local data and a discussion of the factors leading to indicators that look particularly good or particularly concerning to that specific region and then stakeholders are encouraged to use some of the data points to guide the strategic planning portion of the day. Second, each time the FCI data is updated (every six months), letters are sent to all past summit participants, highlighting changes in their data, especially as they relate to strategic planning goals or to areas indicating a need for attention. Finally, J4C responds to all individual requests for assistance interpreting the data including providing update presentations to stakeholder groups in different jurisdictions.

IMPROVING APPEALS OF TERMINATION OF PARENTAL RIGHTS (TPR).

During the 2007 legislative session, J4C was instrumental in getting a law passed (Act 264 / HB 369) to change the appellate process for TPR appeals from direct appeals to discretionary appeals. Discretionary appeals require an application for appeal to be filed with the appellate court under an extremely expedited process. For those cases where the discretionary application is denied, the entire appellate matter is resolved in no more than 70 days. For 2008, J4C focused most of its attention on monitoring the implementation of this new law. For the first 10 months of the year:

- 44 discretionary applications filed
- 14 granted
- 30 dismissed

For the dismissed cases, the median time from docket date to final decision was 24 days. In years prior to the implementation of Act 264, the median time from docket date to final disposition exceeded nine months.

In addition to monitoring the new law, J4C has continued to educate juvenile court stakeholders on the importance of expediting TPR appeals and J4C has continued to explore ways to speed up the production of transcripts, the primary slow down at the trial court level. Under the guidance of J4C Chair the Honorable P. Harris Hines, Justice of the Supreme Court of Georgia and J4C Committee Member the Honorable James Morris, Senior Judge Cobb Juvenile Court discussions have also continued with the Attorney General's Office to foster collaborative efforts regarding deprivation appeals, to encourage active A.G. participation in appeals, including the submission of briefs and to address a list of unresolved cases dating back as far as June of 2004.

INCREASING PLACEMENT STABILITY

Frequent moves can have a negative impact on a child's educational, health and social development. Back in 2007 the J4C was instrumental in the passage of Act 325 / HB 153 that requires notice to all parties and the court about impending placement changes of children in foster care. The purpose of the notice is to allow an opportunity for all parties to raise an objection to the move as well as to seek review of reasonable efforts to prevent unnecessary placement changes. J4C also helped to author an implementation guide for the Act and spent much of 2008 educating stakeholders about the act and monitoring its implementation. For the year ending September 30, 2008, 53% of Georgia's children in foster care had experienced two or fewer placements.

PREVENTING UNNECESSARY REMOVALS

Also known as Family Preservation, this priority revolves around the core child welfare value that children do best in their own homes whenever their own homes can be made safe for them. For some time, J4C has been examining removal rates (i.e. the number of children removed from their homes per 10,000 children in the population) and encouraging closer examination of these numbers. At the time J4C began this work, removal rates across the state varied by a factor of more than 20. Today the statewide median is 2.1 removals per 10,000 children and the range is from 0 removals to 8.9 per 10K.; still a wide range, but a notable improvement in a relatively short period of time.

In 2008, J4C continued this work through a partnership with the Barton Child Law & Policy Clinic at Emory University and the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation to publish *Family Preservation in Georgia: A Legal and Judicial Guide to Preventing*

Family Preservation in Georgia: A Legal and Judicial Guide to Preventing Unnecessary Removal to State Custody.

Available at

[http://childwelfare.net/resources/
Family_Preservation_In_Georgia.pdf](http://childwelfare.net/resources/Family_Preservation_In_Georgia.pdf)

Unnecessary Removal to State Custody. The work was authored by Lila Newberry Bradley and edited by Beth Reimels of Emory University School of Law, the Honorable Stephen Franzen, Judge Gwinnett County Juvenile Court and the Honorable Peggy Walker, Judge Douglas County Juvenile Court. Copies of the document are available at http://childwelfare.net/resources/Family_Preservation_In_Georgia.pdf.

MAJOR ACTIVITIES

COURT IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE (CII)

The CII is modeled after the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges' Model Courts Program. Judges from twelve locations across the state have voluntarily joined the CII

CII Participating Locations

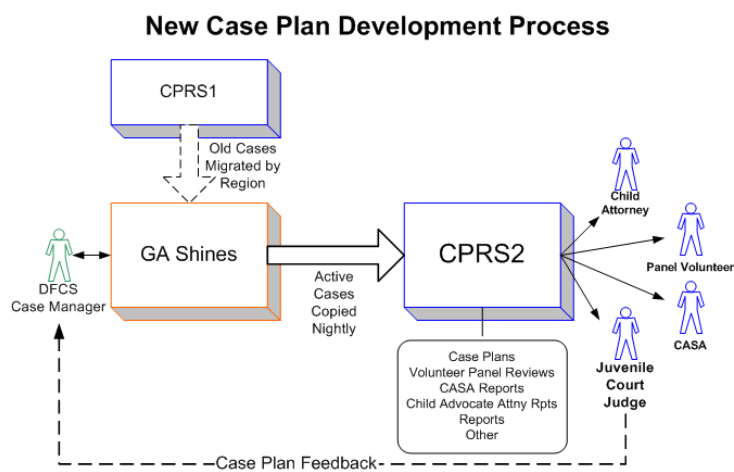
Appalachian Circuit
Bartow County
Clayton County
Chatham County
Cobb County
DeKalb County
Douglas County
Fulton County
Hall County
Houston County
Paulding County
Troup County

in an effort to improve how courts handle child abuse and neglect cases. CII courts come together to share practices, documents and ideas with their peers who are devoting time and energy to doing the best job possible in the always challenging field of child welfare. The semi-annual meetings of CII courts provide a forum for vigorous discussion and shared learning. Each participating court reports on their own improvement efforts with regards to a best practice framework and

the Measures for Courts data measures are provided to each region.

COURT PROCESS REPORTING SYSTEM (CPRS2)

In 2008, the Georgia SHINES (SACWIS) project finished migrating child welfare case plans from the original Case Plan Reporting System (CPRS 1) into Georgia SHINES. Most but not all of the information previously collected was preserved. DFCS staff continue to modify this legacy data and now create all new case plans in SHINES. Then on a nightly basis, CPRS2 downloads the active SHINES cases into CPRS2 so the courts can view the current cases.



Throughout 2008, J4C focused on ensuring judicial access to case plans and providing training on the use of SHINES and CPRS2 to all relevant stakeholders. Additionally, J4C partnered with the CJCJ and Georgia CASA in launching two pilot projects across the state aimed at assessing the utility of generating pre-populated Panel and CASA reports in CPRS2.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- Justice P. Harris Hines (Chair), Supreme Court of Georgia
- Dr. Normer Adams, Exec. Dir. GA Association of Homes and Services for Children
- Ms. Isabel Blanco, DFCS Deputy Director of Field Operations
- Ms. Kathleen Dumitrescu, Esq., Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation
- Mr. Robert Grayson, Esq., Cobb County, Special Assistant Attorney General
- Judge Kevin Guidry, Juvenile Court Piedmont Judicial Circuit
- Judge Jackson Harris, Superior Court Blue Ridge Judicial Circuit
- Mr. Duaine Hathaway, Exec. Dir. Georgia CASA
- Judge Michael Key, Juvenile Court Coweta Judicial Circuit
- Ms. Lisa Lariscy, Regional Director DFCS
- Judge James Morris, Senior Judge of the Courts of Georgia
- Judge Desiree Peagler, Juvenile Court Stone Mountain Judicial Circuit
- Judge Tom Rawlings, Director Office of the Child Advocate
- Judge Lawton Stephens, Superior Court Western Judicial Circuit
- Judge Peggy Walker, Juvenile Court Douglas Judicial Circuit
- Mr. W. Terence Walsh, Esq., Alston & Bird LLP, Chair of the State Bar Committee on Children and the Courts

ADVISORY MEMBERS

- Judge Steven Teske, President, Council of Juvenile Court Judges
- Judge Robert V. Rodatus, President Elect, Council of Juvenile Court Judges
- Judge Bryant Henry, Vice President, Council of Juvenile Court Judges
- Judge Deborah Edwards, Secretary, Council of Juvenile Court Judges
- Judge Gregory Poole, Treasurer, Council of Juvenile Court Judges
- Judge Velma C. Tilley, Immediate Past President, Council of Juvenile Court Judges
- Judge Patricia Stone - District 1
- Judge Herbie Solomon - District 2
- Judge Lisa C. Jones - District 3

- Judge Elliott Shoenthal - District 4
- Judge Juliette Wiltshire Scales - District 5
- Judge Joseph MacNabb - District 6
- Judge Lane Bearden - District 7
- Judge Phillip Spivey - District 8
- Judge J. Russell Jackson - District 9
- Judge Britt Hammond - District 10
- Dr. Jordan Greenbaum, Medical Director, Child Protection Center, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta
- Ms. Darice Good, Esq., Co-chair of Juvenile Law Committee, State Bar of Georgia
- Ms. Kirsten Widner, Esq., Co-chair of Juvenile Law Committee, State Bar of Georgia
- Ms. Gwendolyn B. Skinner, Director, Division of Mental Health Developmental Disabilities and Addictive Diseases
- Ms. Trenny Stovall, Esq., Director, DeKalb County Child Advocacy Center
- Ms. Jennifer Bennecke, Director, Governor's Office for Children and Families
- Mr. Anthony Reeves, Assistant Project Coordinator, Georgia Youth EmpowerMENT Group,
- Dr. Betsy Bockman, Ph.D., Principal Inman Middle School
- Ms. Elaine DeCostanzo, Former Division Director, Office of Planning and Budget
- Ms. Omotayo Alli, Esq., Director, Fulton County Office of the Child Attorney
- Ms. Vivian Egan, Esq., Legal Services Manager, Department of Human Resources, DFCS
- Ms. Sharon Carlson, President, Adoptive and Foster Parent Association
- Ms. Karen Worthington, Director, Barton Child Law and Policy Clinic
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GEORGIA JUVENILE COURTS PROFILE

MEASURES FOR COURTS DATA

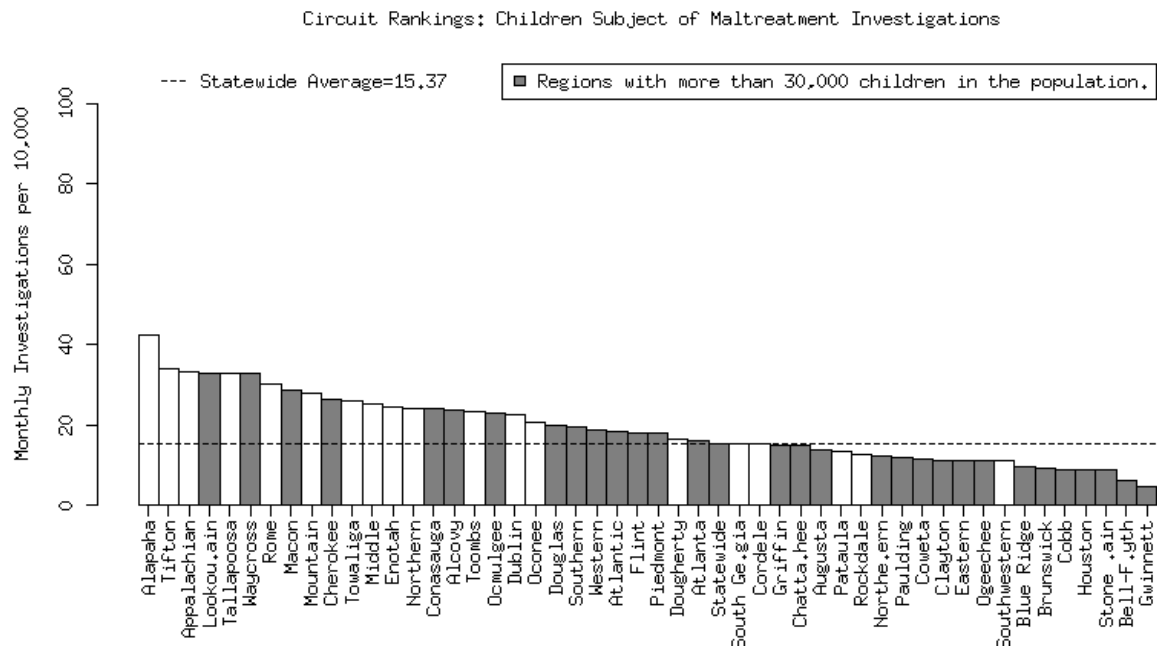
In collaboration with DFCS and the OCA, J4C is able to access both safety and foster care data collected by DFCS from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).

With this data, the courts can review information on safety, removals, in care population, discharges and Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) data. Selected examples of statewide data is presented below, broken down by judicial circuit.

NOTE: AFCARS data is reported to the federal government in six-month increments, with data being sent each March and September. As a result, data is not able to be examined by calendar year. Rather, a year of AFCARS data runs from October 1st to the following September 30th.

NOTE: NCANDS is a voluntary, federally sponsored data collection effort to help states track the volume and nature of child maltreatment reporting. It is collected annually. In 2005, Georgia began submitting data to NCANDS; this year, DFCS began sharing NCANDS data with J4C.

MALTREATMENT INVESTIGATIONS

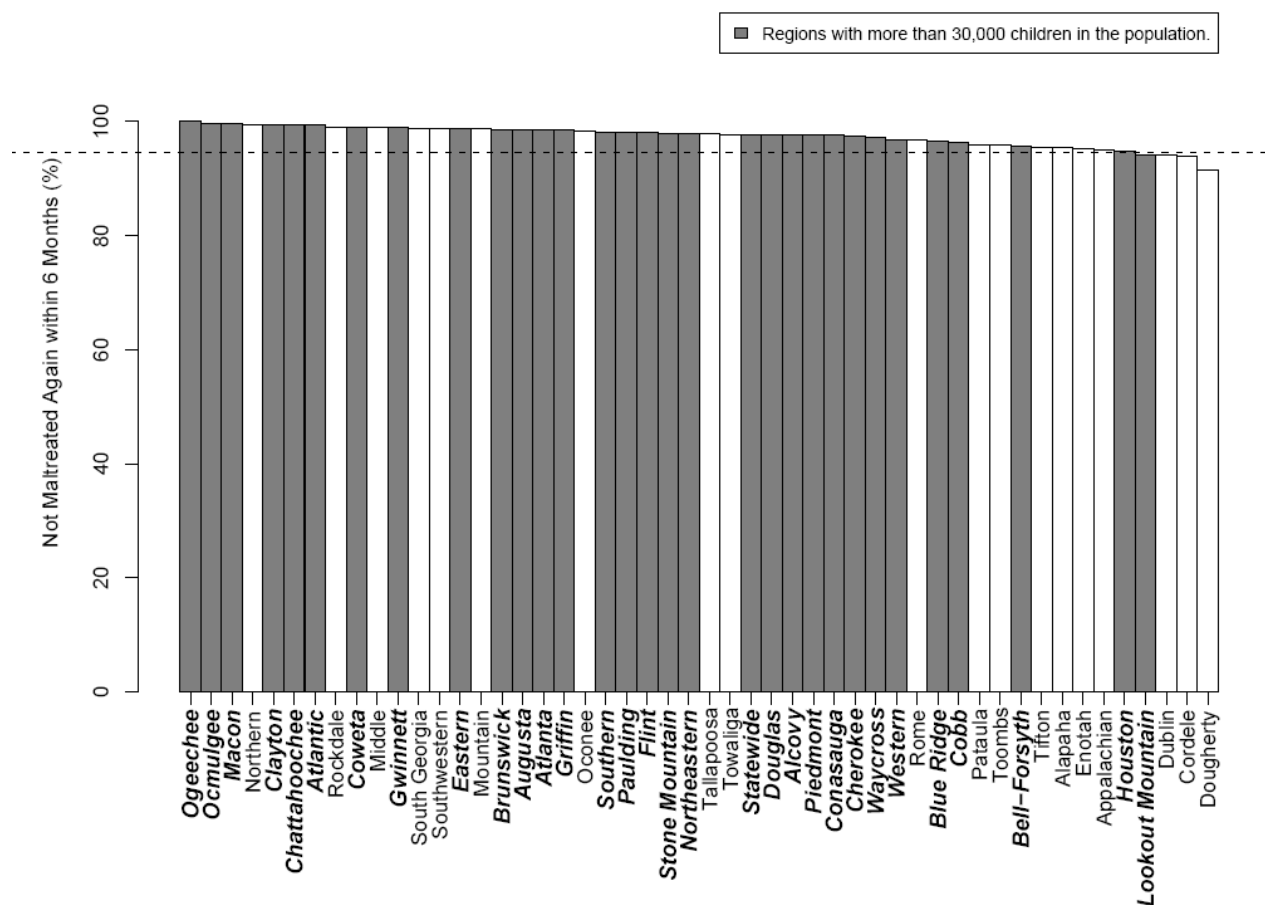


In 1997, Congress enacted legislation creating the CFSR program to focus on outcomes for children and families in the areas of: (1) safety, permanency, and child and family well-being; and (2) systemic factors that directly impact the State's capacity to deliver services leading to improved

outcomes. The policy and legislation marked a dramatic shift from a compliance-driven system to an outcome-driven system. In other words, rather than examining the accuracy and completeness of documents in a case file, the CFSR focuses on evaluating the results of state programs and practices. Through an agreement with DFCS, J4C provides courts with data related to the safety and well-being of children that come into contact with DFCS. The chart above represents the average number of children, per month, that are the subject of a maltreatment investigation, broken down by judicial circuit, for the period of January 2008 through December 2008. While not all instances of abuse and neglect are reported, the information establishes a baseline for the number of children identified by the child welfare system.

RECURRENCE OF MALTREATMENT

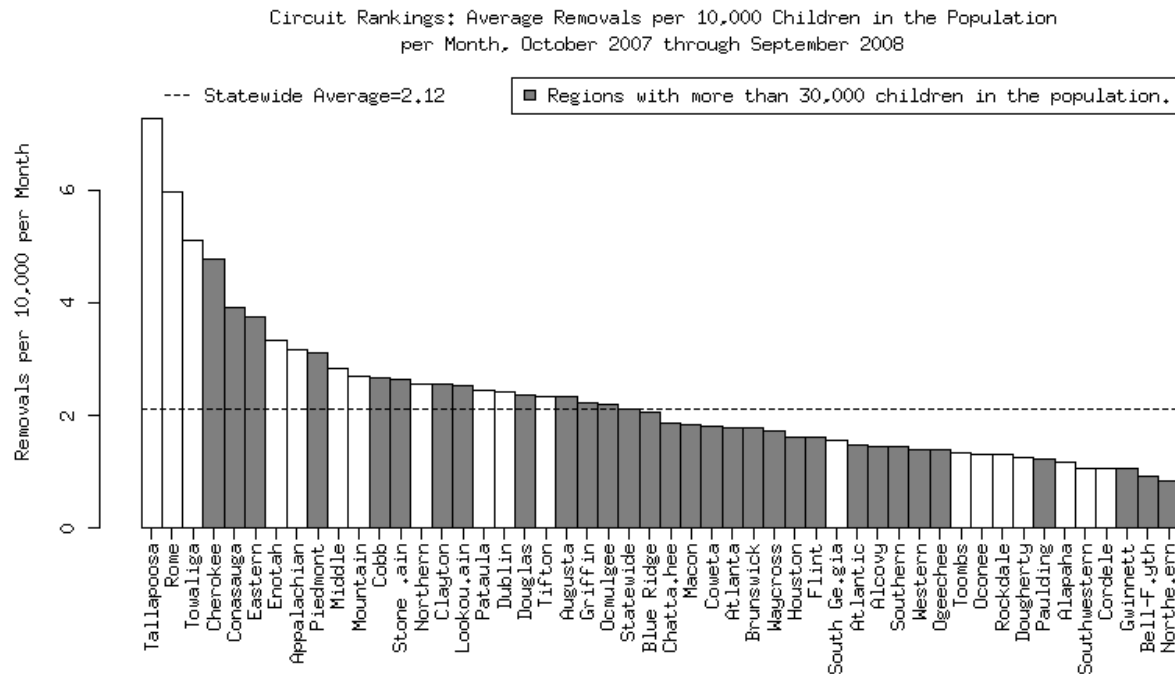
Circuit Rankings: Non-Recurrence of Substantiated Maltreatment within 6 Months



A bottom line of the child welfare system is protecting children. In many cases, this involves the removal of children from dangerous home environments. Once removed, these children should remain safe and should be protected from continued maltreatment. This chart represents a CFSR safety measure that identifies all children who were victims of substantiated or indicated abuse or neglect in a reporting period, and monitors whether any were revictimized during the next six months. The bars represent the percentage of children not revictimized. The dashed line across the top represents the national 75th percentile, the CFSR benchmark by which all juvenile courts are

measured. As the table indicates, a substantial majority of Georgia judicial circuits surpass the national standard – a good indicator that children in state care are generally safe from continued maltreatment.

REMOVALS

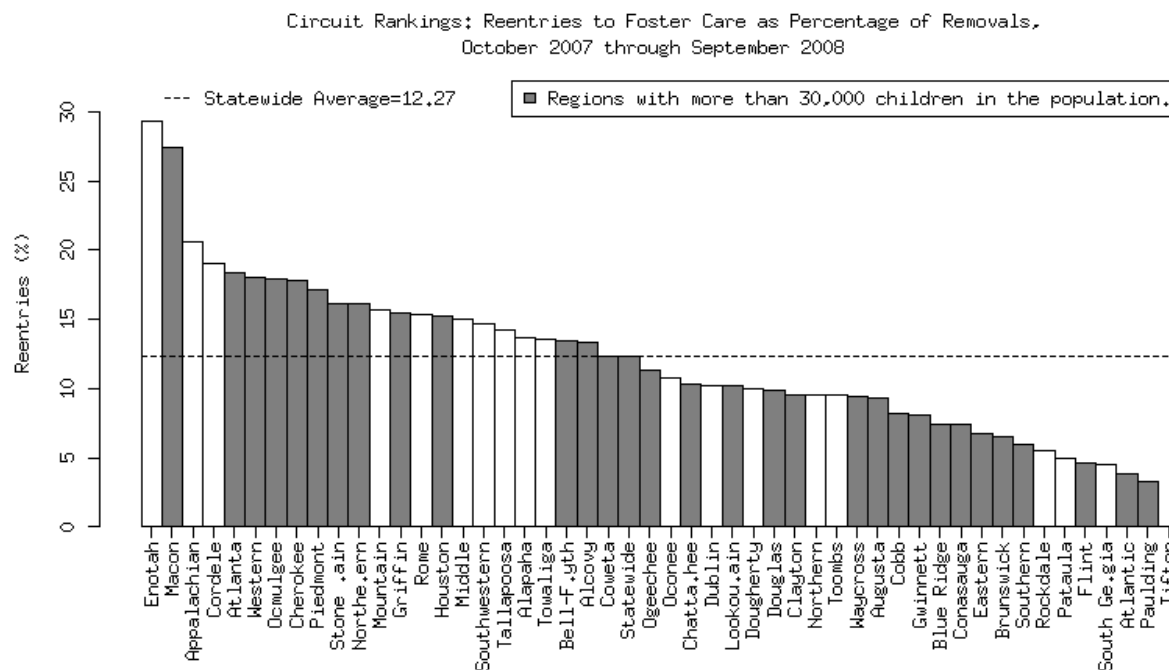


The chart above represents average monthly removals per capita broken down by judicial circuit for the past year. The judicial impact on a county's rate of removing children from their homes is complex with many factors or decisions in play. Through discussions with various courts, J4C has discovered that courts vary in terms of how high they set the evidentiary bar for removals, and we hypothesize that such a difference in practice is one of the main causes of the differences in removal rate between circuits. At the time we began using AFCARS data, removal rates by county varied by a factor of nearly twenty, meaning that families in one county were almost twenty times as likely to have their children removed as families in another Georgia county. This huge disparity in removal rates gave rise to concerns about basic due process/fairness. Over the last several years, the range of removal rates in Georgia has dropped considerably and now varies by a factor of just under nine. All variability will never be removed as actual rates of child abuse and neglect will always vary some from county to county (due to actual differences in rates of abuse as well as differing community standards), but since fairness and standards of practice are essential to our justice system, it is encouraging to see the gap narrow so much over a relatively short period of time.

In addition to narrowing the range of removal rates, the median removal rate itself has fallen considerably. At the time we began looking at this data (2005), the overall rate of removal was 3.9 per 10,000 children in the population. Today the rate is 2.1 per 10K. The overwhelming consensus across the state is that the drop in removal rate is due to the implementation of diversion/family support programs by DFCS. This system is meant to employ alternative responses to incidents that fail to rise to the level of child abuse or neglect. Because we know that removals can be traumatic to

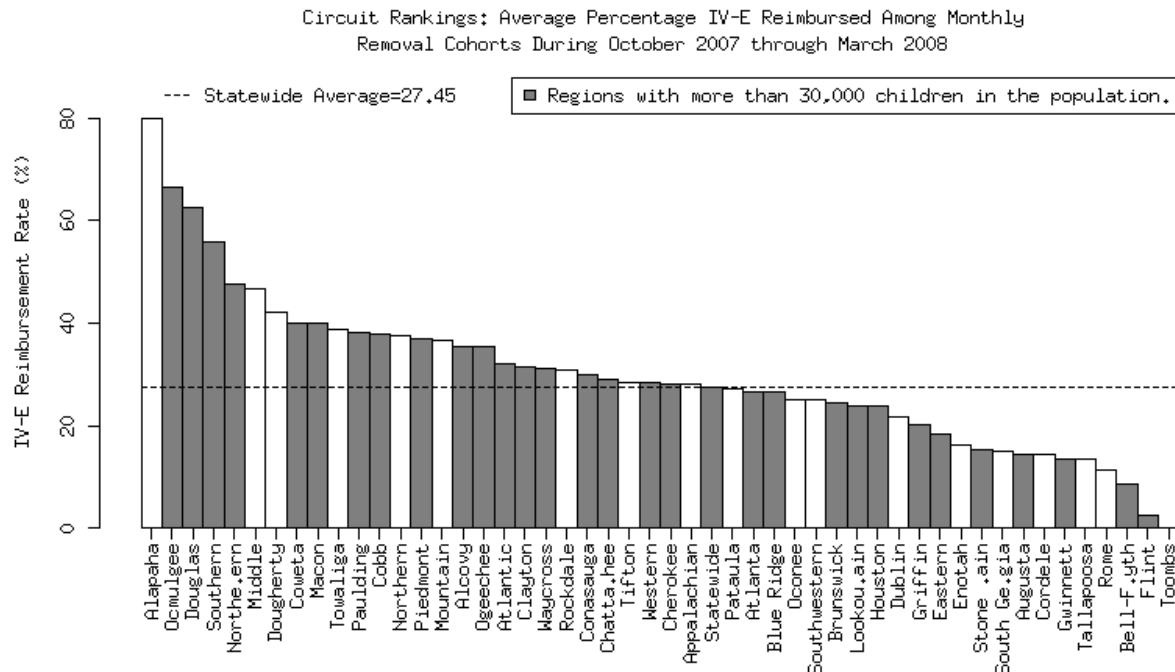
children even under dire circumstances, we always want to avoid unnecessary removals. The counter to reducing removals, however, is that we must also ensure we are not leaving children in dangerous situations. Currently there is no written statewide policy to guide alternative response decisions and public access to data on these cases is limited.

REENTRIES



Current law and policy hold out safety of a child as the number one consideration in all child welfare actions. Just as we are mindful that the failure to remove a child from a dangerous situation can have disastrous consequences, so too can the decision to return a child to an unsafe home. While the initial safety assessment is purely in the hands of the child welfare agency, the judicial branch becomes equally responsible for the safety of a child once the child's case has been presented to a court for an evidentiary ruling. One measure of safety that must be evaluated by the judicial branch is reentry rate. Reentry rate is the number of children who enter foster care who have had a previous stay in foster care. The good news is that last year, the reentry rate dropped in Georgia. For the year ending September 30, 2007, Georgia's statewide reentry rate was 16%. For this past year, it is 12.3%. Ideally no child ever reenters foster care so we have a ways to go but it is encouraging to see Georgia is now moving in the right direction on this measure.

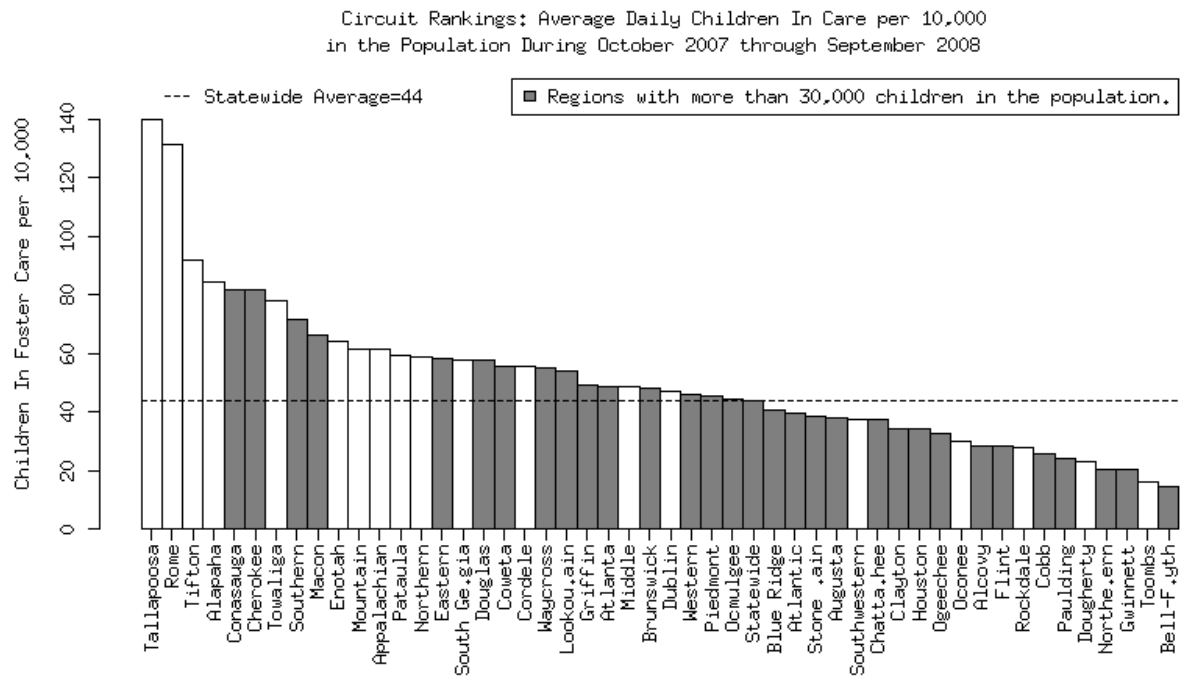
IV-E REIMBURSEMENT



As the chart above shows, for this past year Georgia's statewide IV-E reimbursement rate was 27.5%; meaning the state was able to draw down federal dollars to pay for the care of slightly more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the children in DFCS custody. This number is in-line with figures from recent years that have ranged from 24% (year ending 9/30/06) to 31% (year ending 9/30/05).

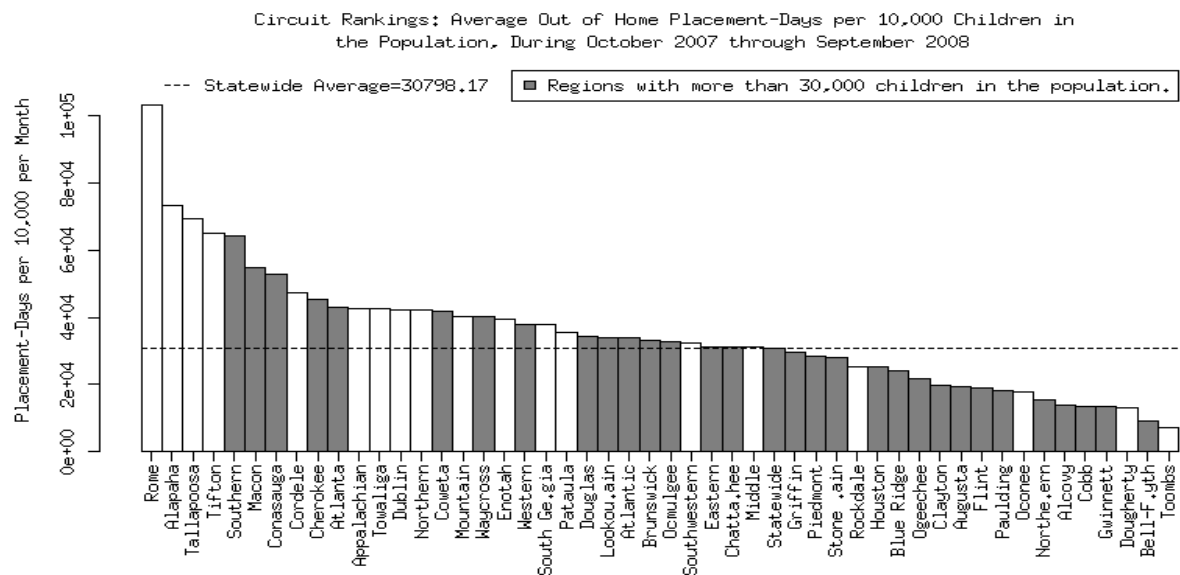
Title IV-E reimbursement is important for the state foster care system since it is the primary source of federal dollars to support child welfare. Many factors go into IV-E eligibility, some beyond the control of any current Georgia child welfare stakeholders (e.g. AFDC look-back rate), some of which are completely in the domain of the executive branch to influence or control and some where courts play a major role, such as by making sure court orders in deprived cases have the necessary legal findings and completing children's hearings in a timely manner. Over the past year, J4C has worked closely with DFCS to follow-up on any problematic court orders and by year's end there were virtually no court orders preventing IV-E eligibility.

IN-CARE POPULATION



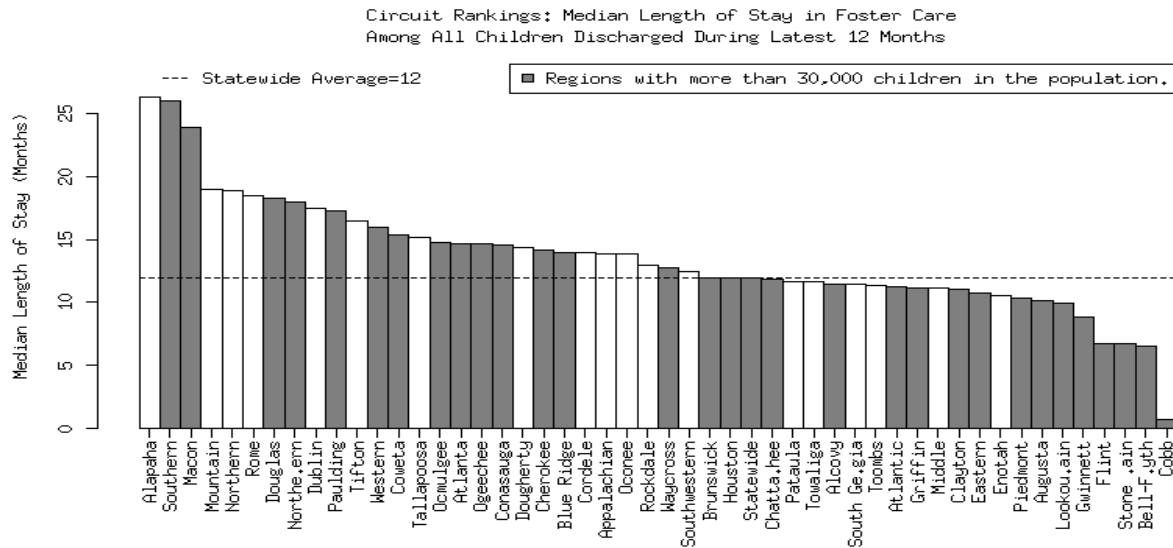
The above chart shows the average number of children in care on any given day. This number is influenced by two key factors: the number of children taken into care (removed) and the length of stay in care. The statewide average has dropped slightly over the last several years but even as the average drops it is perhaps worth noting that several circuits have remained in the top five since at least 2005. They are Tallapoosa, Rome, Alapaha and Conasauga.

OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT DAYS



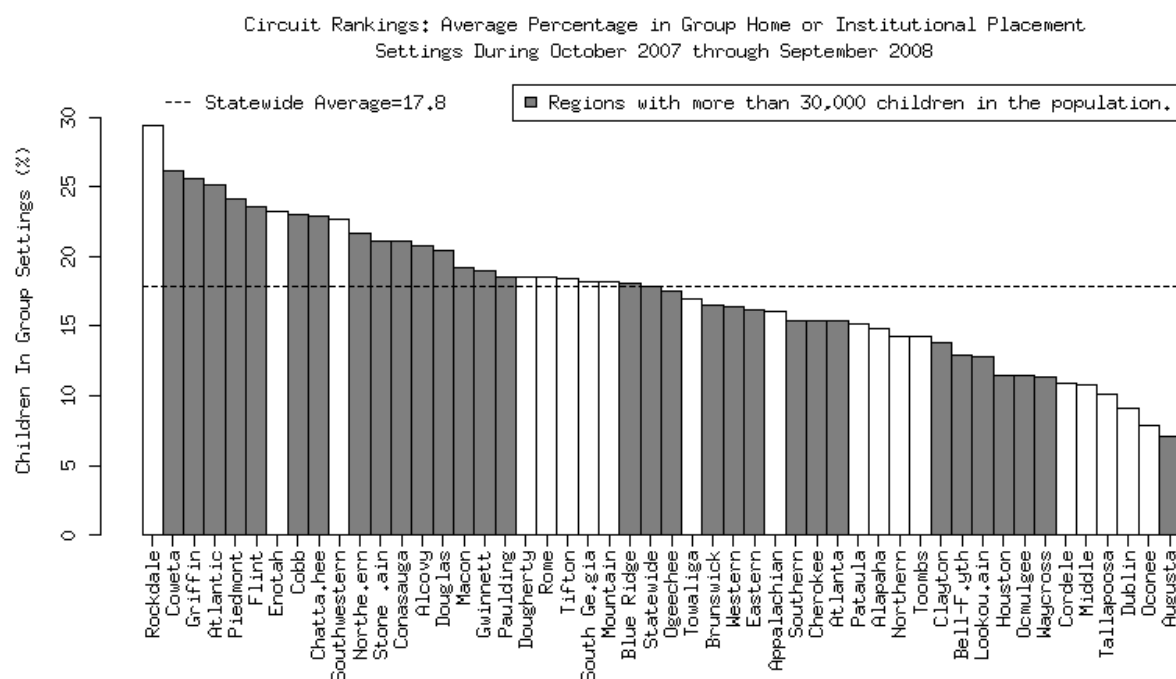
Another way of measuring the foster care population is to look at “placement days.” This is a crude measurement of timeliness but can be used to get an idea of the areas in the state in which children spend longer periods of time in foster care. It also suggests relative costs to an area since each day out-of-home placement days comes at a cost to the county and state. As you can see in the chart above, the Rome Judicial Circuit remains distinguished from the rest of the state.

LENGTH OF STAY



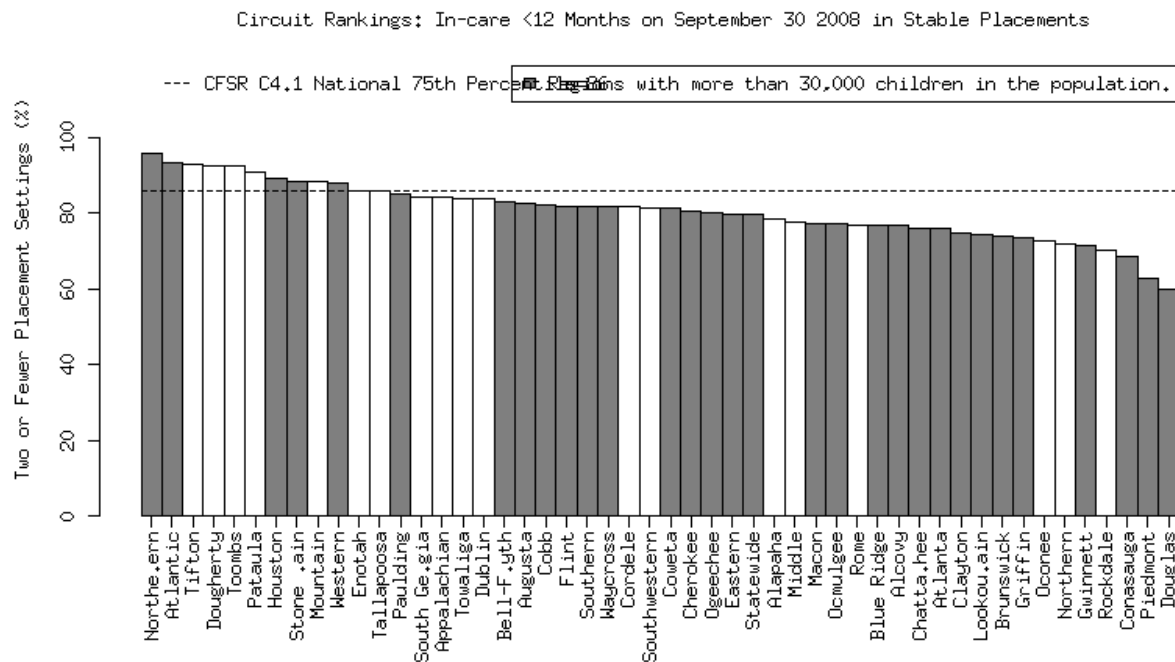
Georgia’s data for median length of stay shows differences in the length of time from entry to exit of foster care ranging from less than a month in Cobb County to median times of two years or more in a few circuits. Such large differences raise some concerns about the consistency of efforts across the state when it comes to achieving timely permanency for children in care. However, one change in this data measure that seems to be positive is a reduction in the number of circuits with very short median lengths of stay. In the past, numerous circuits (not just Cobb) have discharged large numbers of children after only a few weeks or even just a few days in care. This begged the question that if a home could be made safe in such a short period of time, was the initial removal actually necessary.

CONGREGATE CARE



There has been little change in the average number of children in congregate care settings over the last few years. During 2008, J4C summits were held in several of the circuits where the largest percentage of children are in group settings. We are hopeful that the attention brought to high use of congregate settings will result in close scrutiny in the relevant circuits but it remains to be seen if the numbers will change. For one thing, as we talked with local stakeholders we learned that in some circuits, the large number of children in congregate settings is due simply to a lack of available foster homes or sufficient community services to keep a child out of a secure setting but that with the appropriate resources, the numbers in congregate care could drop. However, in at least one setting (the Atlantic Circuit) when the actual children behind the data were examined, it was noted that the high percentage of children in congregate care was overwhelmingly due to several large sibling groups who had been placed together in cottage/group home setting for the purpose of maintaining all siblings in a single placement. This may well reflect the best possible placement decision for those siblings and thus no change should be made in the circuit's use of congregate care.

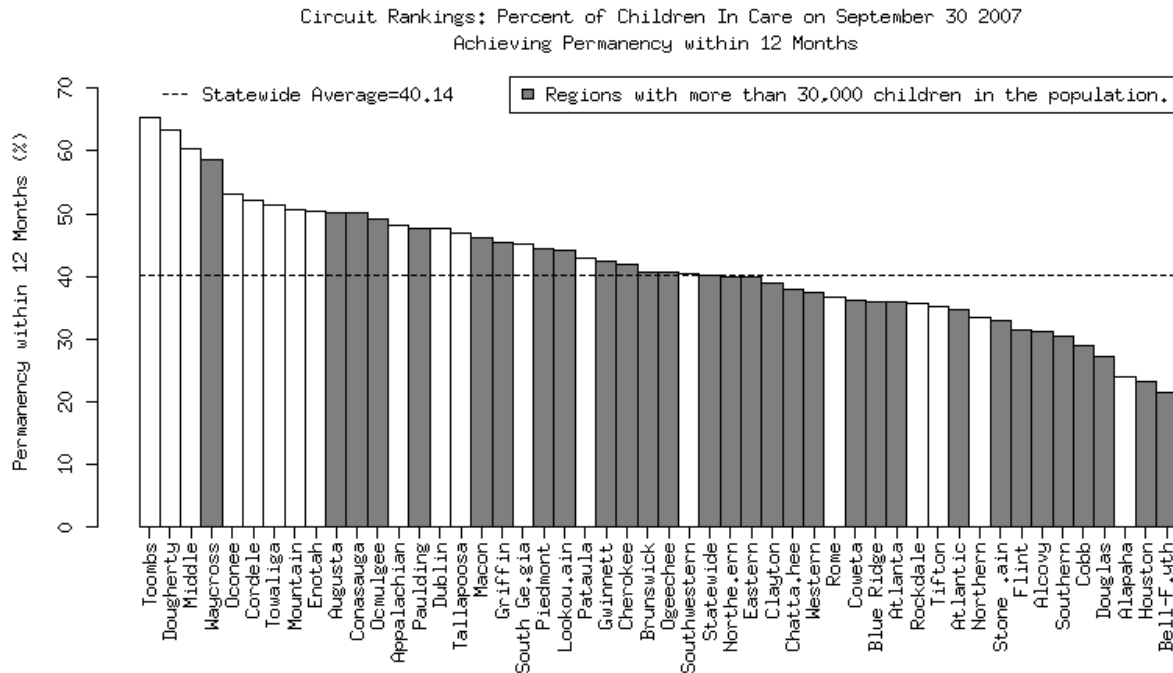
PLACEMENT STABILITY



Just as removal from the home of origin usually causes trauma to a child, so too does each successive move while in the foster care system. Children with many moves, frequently develop trust issues and fail to bond with any caring adults. The children who move from home to home, also frequently move from school to school and from doctor to doctor. They often end up performing below grade level or even dropping out and medical issues can be missed or treatment delayed when a child experiences excessive moves. At the time of the most recent Child and Family Service Review, Georgia performed reasonably well on the issue of placement stability. Unfortunately, over the last few years, a downward trend is appearing.

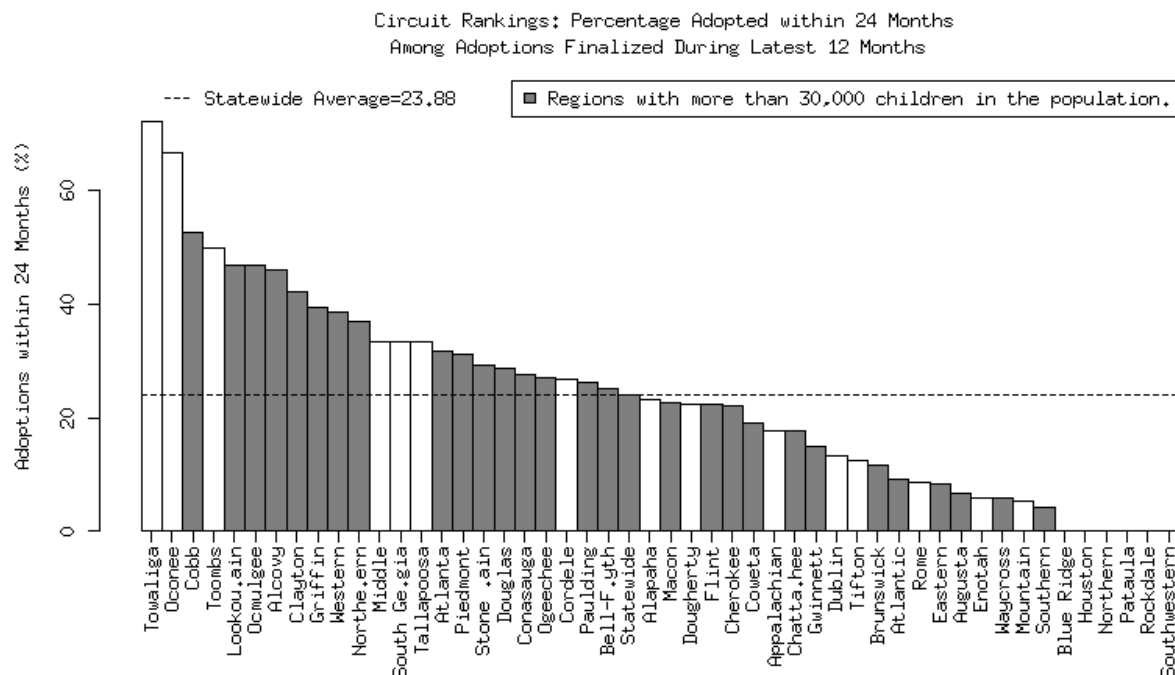
Placement stability is measured by the percentage of children who have experienced two or fewer placement moves while in care. The state average for 2005-2006 was 63%. The following year it fell to 58% and for this most recent year it was just 53%. Some of the lesser stability is likely due to the fact that Georgia is taking fewer children into care and that presumably those children are faced with more serious challenges, thus needing higher end placements and displaying behaviors that lead to placement disruptions. However, it is still very concerning to see a 10% drop in placement stability over such a short time.

PERMANENCY



Achieving permanency for the children who come into state custody is a crucial goal of the entire child welfare system. One measure of permanency to be considered is how many children achieve permanency within a twelve month period. The above chart represents a snapshot in time. If we look at every child who was in foster care on September 30, 2007 and follow those same children for the next 12 months, we can measure what percentage of them achieved permanency in that time frame. The chart above shows a range with some counties reporting that less than 30% of this population achieved permanency within 12 months, while the most successful counties show well over 50% achieving permanency within a year. Statewide, the average percentage is up a bit for at least the second year in a row, which is good news for those children who are now in permanent homes, but it also means that more than half the children in care on September 30th, 2007 were still in care a full year later. Thus there is little question that Georgia must work to increase the number of children achieving timely permanency.

ADOPTION TIMELINESS



The process of adoption, by its very nature, takes longer than most other forms of permanency. That said, a child awaiting permanency through the process of adoption should not have to wait for years and years to see that goal accomplished. During the 2007 CFSR process, Georgia was found to have some difficulty with regard to timely permanency and the state did not meet the national standards for timeliness of adoptions (composite #2). Over the last year, both the courts and agency have devoted considerable efforts to improving adoption timeliness and results are starting to show. One measure examined by the federal government is the number of adoptions that are completed within 24 months of the child's entry into care. For the year ending September 30, 2005, 21% of Georgia's adoptions were completed within 24 months. This past year, 24% of adoptions were completed in the same time frame. Similarly the federal government measures the number of adoptions completed within 48 months of entry into care. That measure has risen from 72% in 2005, to 79% this past year. As can be seen in the chart above there is great variability across circuits – with some circuits failing to complete a single adoption within 24 months while some complete more than half their adoptions in that time frame. With the renewed focus on timely adoptions, it is hoped that these percentages will continue to rise.

SUMMARY

During the past decade, major shifts in law and policy have ushered in positive changes for court-involved children, and more are soon to come with the recent enactment of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. At the same, the state of Georgia is seeing a reduction in the number of children coming into foster care but in these times of economic difficulty, resources remain tight. Judicial leadership is crucial to provide children with appropriate protection, permanency plans, necessary services, due process for parents and children, and timely resolution of cases. Much of the work done by J4C is fueled by a philosophy requiring accountability to the children and families served by the juvenile courts and the child welfare system as well as to provide quality assurance monitoring to the juvenile courts in their efforts to improve.

As much as this document reports on the past, it also reflects our direction for the future. It is the clear intent of the federal government that juvenile courts embrace data measures and hold themselves accountable for the work they do. The Committee on Justice for Children welcomes such a charge and will use future annual reports to share Georgia's progress in improving its juvenile court system.